

October 18, 2000

Town Urged to Preserve 30% of Unused Land

Selectmen to Consider Property Tax Increase for Open Space Purchases

By SUSANNA SHEEHAN

A volunteer group charged with researching ways to finance open space purchases recommended to selectmen that Duxbury sign on to the Community Preservation Act to allow the town to finance land acquisitions through a property tax increase.

The committee also said the town needs to set out goals for obtaining open space and balancing growth, and it recommended a program that sets aside 30 percent of Duxbury's unused land for open space.

Selectmen praised the Land Acquisition Task Force com-

mittee for their work, which began in May, but reserved their support for the Community Preservation Act until they read the committee's full report and learned more about this new law.

Committee chairman David Hines of Screenhouse Lane told selectmen the committee reviewed the town's open space needs as outlined by the comprehensive plan, open space plan and town wide survey and then set out to research how other places, such as Harvard, Martha's Vineyard, Franklin

continued on page 19

continued from page one

Cape Cod and Nantucket, funded their open space purchases. The committee wanted to take the "best practices," or what worked best, for these communities and incorporate it for Duxbury.

It also realized the town had never defined how much land it wanted to preserve, and only bought open space "in fits and starts" over the last 30 years. According to Hines, of the 15,455 acres in Duxbury, 5,889 acres are developed, 4,200 are open space and 5,366 acres remain unused. The committee saw a need to set goals and decided to take a "moderate" approach that would preserve three of 10 acres for open space, allowing seven of ten acres to be developed. It took into consideration the proposed build-out information that states the town could see an 80 percent increase in population, from 15,000 to 27,000 people, if all the developable land in town is used. It also took into account the building pressures the south shore is under with the huge growth of Plymouth and Carver, the expansion of Route 3 and the possibility that cranberry bogs could someday be reclassified and used for building new homes.

The cost of setting aside

three of 10 acres would be \$9 million, or \$120 per household, (\$2,400) over 20 years. This money would be generated from a three percent property tax increase. This would be over and above Proposition 2 1/2 and would require ballot approval.

While Duxbury could attempt to institute such a program on its own, Hines said that now that the state has passed the Community Preservation Act, it would not be allowed. However, he said, this law will allow the town to accomplish its goals.

"We recommend the town endorse and pass the Community Preservation Act," said Hines. "It meets the goals. The Community Preservation Act will get us there. It provides for balanced growth. It incorporates the best practices."

The Community Preservation Act is a five-year program in which towns can raise taxes

one to three percent above Proposition 2 1/2 yet they must spend this revenue on open space, historical preservation and affordable housing, with each receiving a minimum of 10 percent. The state will give matching funds each year.

"We've got this amorphous program that's not clear where we're going or what it's going to cost me as a taxpayer," said Hines. The Community Preservation Act "is one of the only programs I can think of where there's a return on investment for homeowner." By setting aside 30 percent of the town for open space, it lowers the supply of housing and will increase home values by \$25,000 to \$50,000 each because of increased demand, Hines said. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see this is great program for homeowners."

Under the Community Preservation Act, Duxbury's town meeting must still approve each purchase. Also, town meeting could still buy open space in a piecemeal fashion as it currently does. In addition, Hines said, the state may impose restrictions on the open space land bought under the act, but that was not something anyone knew for sure.

In addition, for a faster response time for buying land as it becomes available, the private Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Mass. may create a Duxbury Conservation Trust that could buy open space privately and sell it back to the town at town meeting.

Selectmen said they were impressed with the committee's work and were eager to read its final report.

"The committee did a great job," said Selectman John Tuffy. "The Community Preservation Act is something we need to learn more about. Part of what I'm going to struggle with is if this is a priority."

Tuffy explained one of the reasons the town bought open land sporadically was because of economic times. Buying land became less of a priority when budget crises forced school and firehouse closures in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "If this (the Community Preservation

Act) was in place and we had to close schools and close fire stations because we didn't have the money, we would continue to tax ourselves to buy land," Tuffy said. "We as a board, as a town, and as a community need to learn a whole lot more about this."

Selectman André Martecchini said: "I have mixed feelings on the whole Community Preservation Act. On one hand, it would be nice to have a dedicated revenue stream (for open space). On the other hand, I've been very impressed with town meeting (buying open space.) The fact that this comes with some strings attached has some con-

cerns for me."

Martecchini pointed out that "there are other ways, through the zoning process, to help preserve open space."

Selectmen Chairman Margaret Kearney said the if the town adopts the Community Preservation Act it could help with affordable housing and historic preservation, which the town has somewhat neglected, but she needed to see the requirements of the plan for these issues, which were not discussed at Monday night's meeting.

"We don't have a good track record on affordable housing," said Kearney. "We do not have a good track record on historic

preservation. The last time we tried to pass an historic district on High St., it failed. We have a demolition bylaw, but we haven't done enough."

Kearney thanked the committee for showing the town it needed to have goals for open space purchases and a plan to meet those goals. "

Kearney said the committee needed to meet with the town's financial boards to plan how this program with its tax increase fits into the larger financial picture that includes the tax increase that will come if town meeting finances a \$30 million school expansion project.